



Heart Reach Helping Youngstown Youth

With 400 to 500 young people regularly participating in its programs, Heart Reach Ministries is making a difference in the Youngstown community. Targeting the city's toughest areas, Heart Reach's mission is to equip, encourage and empower "at-risk" youth in Youngstown to thrive spiritually, emotionally, socially and educationally.

A faith-based agency, Heart Reach directs its services to children and youth from Youngstown's inner-city. Pre-school and Head Start programs serve infants and other pre-kindergarten-age children.

For elementary-age students, Kid's Club is part of an after-school program, which includes literacy and life skills components, in addition to tutoring. Super Kids: Character Counts offers character-education, teaching core values through puppet programs, object lessons and audio-visual presentations. It is offered in the after-school setting as well as through school assemblies.

The aim of Heart Reach's Crossover program is to help junior high youth transition from elementary age to being young adults. Its four components are core values; community service; the arts, including drama, mime and puppetry; and role modeling for Character Counts' elementary-age participants.

To bring down walls of division—especially between gangs—Heart Reach's Christside ("Christside") effort reaches out to senior high teens with homework help, life skills training and evangelism. Project 18's goal is that by age 18 all of the youth in the program will (1) graduate or get a GED, (2) have a job, and (3) have a documented life plan. It also includes a drop-in center offering basketball, football and game room activities.

Summer camps and neighborhood block parties also have helped Heart Reach to develop and strengthen relationships throughout the community.

Heart Reach began in 1988 as a project spearheaded by local churches and businesses. “We wanted to create an outreach which would make a positive difference in the lives of kids, and we wanted it to be faith-based,” says Al Yanno, Jr., executive director of Heart Reach Ministries. “We raised up an army of volunteers and got buses and a building.”

Its original character education programs have expanded tremendously. Adopt-a-Child provides an opportunity to mentor a child by supporting the outreach to him or her, and visiting and interacting with that child.

Heart Reach participants benefit from the program’s four buses and two vans, which bring children from across the city to Heart Reach’s center. Mahoning County Educational Services, Youngstown City Schools, Americorps and Foster Grandparents are four vital collaborations for Heart Reach. It also has informal collaborative relationships with Boys and Girls Clubs and the Center for Community Empowerment.

Future expansion includes housing and arts plans. “Our dream is to own homes in the city where we can put families and help them get on their feet through life skills training,” Yanno says, “ultimately helping them to own their own homes.”

An urban school of the arts would be an after-school training center for dance, drama and rap, and would include a recording studio.

Heart Reach plans to use its 2004-2005 Ohio Compassion Capital Sub-Award for an official financial audit and for an organizational evaluation by a firm specializing in non-profits. A portion of the grant will also be used for the training and certification of teachers and tutors.

“As we expand and enhance our outreach, the community receives us with open arms,” Yanno says. “It is the perfect time for us to grow and we are grateful for the grant.”